

The Price of Freedom

It's another rainy night in Rhode Island. I'm relaxing in the kitchen of the Providence Zen Center nursing a cup of tea in the after hours darkness. We have just finished another long day of teaching as part of a Yoga Teacher's Training Course when out of the shadows emerges one of my students.

"Hey Alex."

"Hi E," he says, "mind if I sit down?"

I gesture to an open chair. He sits.

There together in the dimly lit kitchen among the hum of the refrigerators and the patter of the rain outside, neither of us speaks, although Alex lets out an audible sigh.

"What's up, Alex?" I ask.

"I guess I feel like I'm being pulled in a lot of different directions."

"How so?"

"Competing priorities I guess. You know, work, practice, fun, family..."

"You know, a great yogi from the Zen tradition once said, 'The most important thing is to know what is the most important thing.'"

"Yeah, that makes a lot of sense." Alex nods in acknowledgement, although indifferently as if I just told him that the white zone was for loading and unloading passengers only. He keeps nodding, pensively.

"So?" I ask.

"So what?"

"So what is the most important thing?" I prod.

"How would I know? You're the teacher." He says and then sits back for me to cast down the pearls of wisdom that will set him free.

"No, no, Alex, you've got it all wrong. I'm not asking you for 'the' answer, I'm asking you for 'your' answer." I smile. "Let's try this: what's the most important thing for you?"

"You mean right now?"

"Is there anything other than right now?" I say. Damned yoga teachers always have a snippy comeback for everything.

"I guess its enlightenment, God-realization, you know awakening to my True nature."

"You guess?"

Alex stammers for a moment and then stops to collect his thoughts. A few minutes pass as I sip some tea and turn my gaze out the window to give him some space to ponder.

"No, I'm sure. That's it: enlightenment." He comes back.

"Okay, so for you, the most important thing is liberation."

"Yeah."

"And what are you willing to pay for this most precious of jewels?" I ask.

"Pay?" A look of surprise comes over him.

"Yes pay. What are you willing to part with in exchange for everlasting joy and freedom?" I ask.

I can see Alex calculating his net worth in his head; then a flash of realization: "Why do I have to part with anything? The scriptures say that money doesn't matter, in fact in the Bible, Jesus said that it's easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle, than it is for a rich man to enter the gates of heaven." He sits back with a look of satisfaction on his face: checkmate yoga teacher.

"That may be true, but he also says 'Thy will be done', not 'my will be done.'"

"Yeah, but what does that have to do with payment?"

"That's the price."

"What is?"

"Your will, your will is the price."

"That's it?"

"Yup, but remember that it's not just your will that is at stake, it's everything you use your will for. The sacrifice includes all of the ways you use your will in service of your small, separate false self: performing your actions, achieving your desires, and enforcing all of your personal agendas, preferences, and opinions."

"Oh." From the look on Alex's face, I'm guessing sticker shock is setting in.

"It's all about sacrifice; surrendering your own agendas to the Higher." I say, "Could that involve money? Sure, but only if money is important to you. If you couldn't care less about money, then you don't need to sacrifice it."

"So if I don't care about money, I don't need to sacrifice it?" Alex echos.

I can see the wheels in his head turning again.

"True," I say, "but you can't pretend not to care about it, in order not to sacrifice it."

"Hmmm." He looks down at the table. "Can I have some tea?"

"Help yourself." I slide the teapot toward him. "Cups are in the cupboard behind you."

"Thanks." He rises to retrieve a cup, returns, and pours his tea. Silence again, soft and relaxing. Refrigerator, rain, darkness, tea.

And then out of nowhere Alex blurts "So who collects?"

"Who collects what?"

"The payment; who do I pay?"

I smile. "Ah, I see. Well, before we figure out who to pay, you need to make sure you're even willing to pay."

"Oh, I am." He asserts.

"Are you?" I smile, "Alex, I can't even get you to sit still for a 20 minute meditation."

"I was uncomfortable."

"I know. My body was uncomfortable too," I say, "but it doesn't necessarily follow that you have to do something about it. Remember Nisargadatta Maharaj's quote about liberation?"

"You mean: 'If you have any idea of influencing events, liberation is not for you?'"

"Exactly."

"What do you suppose you're engaged in as you fidget, scratch, and wiggle?"

"Influencing events?"

"Influencing events." I nod, "And therefore..."

"Liberation is not for me?"

"Bingo."

"It's a funny thing, not just about you, but about all of us." I say, "We say that we are committed to enlightenment, we tell ourselves we'll pay whatever is necessary, but when it comes right down to it, we'd rather scratch our noses or watch American Idol."

We sit silently staring out the windows into the dark rainy night.

"I watch my own tendencies," I continue, "to hemorrhage time and effort chasing after something other than the 'most important thing.' It's crazy. Much of the time, our actions simply aren't in line with our intentions, and we then wonder why we're not getting anywhere."

Alex shakes his head. "Why do we do that?"

"I'm not sure, but I've got an idea or two."

Alex gazes into the darkness behind me. "What's your idea?"

"Let me ask you this first," I pause to have a drink of my rapidly cooling tea, "What if I were to tell you about a treasure I knew about?"

"Did you say a treasure?"

"Deep in the Amazon rainforest; over \$100 million."

Alex perks up, enough of this spiritual mumbo-jumbo, now we're talking.

"Let's say, hypothetically, that I knew exactly where a German cargo plane crashed carrying gold and jewels raided from Western Europe in the final days of World War II."

"Yeah?"

"What would you say?"

"The first thing I'd say is 'yeah right.'"

"What if I had proof; what if I had seen it with my own two eyes?"

Alex's eyes get a little wider. "I'd say let's go; let's hop on the next plane to South America."

"What about this retreat?"

"I can come back next year."

"What about your job?"

"To hell with it."

"What about your commitments over the next couple of months?"

"I'll cancel them."

"It's crashed in the remotest part of the jungle—that's why nobody has found it yet. It'll be treacherous and difficult and expensive."

"Listen, for \$100 million, heck for \$10 million, I'm willing to take the risk." Alex says.

I laugh, "This is precisely the issue."

"What is?"

"People are willing to do fabulously dangerous and unsavory things for reward on the material plane. Just turn on the TV and you'll find people eating buckets of worms for a chance to win measly \$10,000. The irony is that I can't get people to sit still for 20 minutes in the name of everlasting freedom."

A moment of recognition shows in Alex's eyes. "I never quite thought about it that way."

"The way I see it, there is a gulf between what people say they want and what they do. And for the people who even bother with spiritual practices this disconnect is caused by one of three beliefs:

1. The belief that enlightenment won't really solve anything:

For this group the sentiment is something like: "It's a nice idea but I'm saving up for a vacation in Fiji, and I know that will solve my problems—at least for two weeks." For these folks, spirituality is a dalliance and interesting diversion from their work and other hobbies, but they still feel the solution to their dis-ease can be found in the material world.

2. The belief that enlightenment is not realistically within their grasp:

From this perspective comes the idea that "Temporary relief is better than no relief." When one believes that liberation is out of reach for the foreseeable future, practice is eroded. Most of us want relief from our discomfort now-or at the very least soon. If one can't get it everlastingly, even a fleeting taste will do.

3. Misunderstanding regarding how the process of awakening works:

Without the requisite understanding, it is probable that our old habits will sabotage our practice. "What possible difference does it make if I scratch my nose or not?" This group asks this without any recognition how minor deviations from practice, like scratching one's nose, are simply symptoms of grander and more pernicious habits.

"And unfortunately any of these pitfalls is enough to keep people trapped in their old habits. In a certain way, you have to have exhausted all of your other avenues to happiness before you become serious about this work. So long as you still have hope that you'll finally be able to get things the way you want them in the material world, you're kind of screwed."

"But I'm not sure I get it." Alex says, "I mean I understand the commitment thing, but what's so magical about sacrificing my will, giving up my agenda? What's wrong with it?"

"You know Alex, that's a really good question—and an important one if you're going to be able to skillfully navigate your way through this process."

Alex smiles.

"The short answer is that there is nothing wrong with your will, your agenda, or in fact anything about you. With that said, there are certain aspects of your behavior derived from your agenda that largely block your experience of enlightenment."

I pause to let that sink in.

"What is the one thing that all great spiritual traditions strive for?" I ask.

"Enlightenment, God-realization."

"And what's the state that these traditions aim for to facilitate this realization?"

"Ummm." Alex stares at the table as if the answer was embedded in the wood grain like some Da Vinci Code clue.

"Psalm 46:10?" I prompt.

"Be still and know that I am God" Alex replies tentatively.

"Yes, and Yoga Sutra 1:2?"

"Stilling the fluctuations of the mind?"

"Uh huh. And how does Krishna refer to it in the Bhagavad Gita?"

"I'm not sure..."

"Krishna calls it 'equanimity of mind.' But no matter what terms you use there is a common theme across not only these, but all traditions."

"So stillness is important." Alex concludes.

"Eliminating the distractions caused by 'objects in awareness' is important, removing the incessant plans and projects that keep us focusing toward objects and away from who we really are is important; stillness is the expression of this." I say, "And what is the one thing that more than any other destroys stillness, distracts attention, and thrusts us into endless struggle, resistance, and grasping?"

Alex smiles, "Given the trajectory of this conversation, I'm going to guess it's our personal agendas."

"Buy this man a drink." I smile as I pour more tea into Alex's cup.

We clink cups in a mock toast. Smiles.

"Your agenda for things to be a certain way is the womb of conflict."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that when I have a fixed idea of how something should be, it is that fixed idea—my agenda if you will—that sets me up for potential conflict, angst, and struggle. For anytime something shows up in my life, whether it's a person, a job situation, or the weather, that happens to be out of line with my agenda—I get thrown off balance."

"And you feel the need to do something about it." Alex adds.

"You got it."

"It's nothing other than my desire for something to be different from how it is that gives rise to the perception of dissatisfaction."

"And dissatisfaction is what prompts you to get involved manipulating and striving?"

"Precisely, dear Watson." I say.

Alex smiles as he takes a drink of tea.

"So what you're saying is that there is nothing wrong with my will or my agendas..."

"Nothing at all," I concur.

"It is just that they tend to keep me focusing in the wrong direction."

"That's it. You become focused on all the doing, achieving, and manipulating in service of your agenda, and this distracts you from the experience of your true Self."

"And this is why the price of enlightenment is my personal will—and everything it serves." Alex answers.

"Right again."

With a look of worry, Alex continues, "But if I give up my will, my agendas, my hopes, how am I supposed to get anything done?"

"It all depends on what you mean by get things done." I say, "This is where your choice enters in: you can choose the endless task of catering to the ego's wants and desires in the hopes that someday it will all finally pay off big, or you can give up the struggle, abandon 'influencing events', in favor of liberation and everlasting happiness."

"So the way I pay the price is by putting it all down." Alex says. "I think I've got it."

"I think you do." I smile. "And let me add one last little piece: This surrender of the will doesn't mean that nothing is done, or nothing is achieved. You still live your life, you still brush your teeth, you still go to work, but you do none of these things with an expectation that they will turn out as you wish. You do what you do while willingly allowing life to unfold as it does."

"Sounds relaxing." Alex adds.

"It does, doesn't it."

So it's like Krishna says, 'You have the right to action, but not to the results of action.' Alex smiles.

"Exactly Alex, like Krishna says."

Blessings to all,

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